

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

January/February 2014 No. 121

Chairman's Piece

Happy New Year! In January last year we were in the midst of concerns over Churchgate and about to mount a petition, which seemed to help in swinging the Council's opinion to terminate the Simons' contract, not a moment too soon. What happened then? Apart from the one Councillor on Cabinet who stood up for what was obviously right, and getting sacked from Cabinet for her efforts, we have been waiting for news on Hammersmatch's proposal to improve Churchgate, build a cinema and do something with the market. No news yet, but we wait in hope.

Meanwhile another petition – this time about the future of the tennis club: http://www.change.org/en-GB/organisations/hitchin_tennis_club. The issues around Bancroft are complex, with various interest groups – see article below. We hope that BDP, the design consultants appointed by NHDC, will find a design which accommodates most of the aspirations. What we do not want is that well worn phrase about the Council knowing the will of the 34,000 Hitchin residents, and so are able to ignore the muttering of a few hundred, or thousand (who might just have spent enough time in thinking and talking about their local patch that they do have a worthwhile opinion). What has been clear since the time that the Council announced its masterplan, after having no consultations with the public for 18 months, is that the assessment of use of the public tennis courts had not been done. 34,000 do not play tennis there at present, but there are a few hundred now who do, and over the years more will do so. Public tennis has been there since 1929 and it is part of my heritage experience to play there with my children, as many others have done. We feel that BDP have worked hard in the short time available, and we hope that Lottery money can be found and used on a refurbishment that we can all applaud. We also hope that the Council will enable worthwhile changes.

Demolition is evident elsewhere – clearing the sites for Hitchin Town Hall and Museum, and for the Portmill hotel and Hermitage Road flats and shops. The face of Hitchin is changing, piece by piece, as it has over the centuries. What happens nearby could be less in tune with it. Mr Miliband seems to think that local people should be disenfranchised and not decide on the West of Stevenage growth. We suspect Mr Pickles will approve of the Luton airport expansion, which has the support of some Luton councillors, whilst we will have little say in either invasion. We support our Council in seeking to oppose these invasions.

Sometimes our only weapon is to spread the word, and provide information. I had mixed feelings in meeting someone recently who was not sure if he was a member of Hitchin Forum – he reads what we publish and strongly supports what we say. We concluded that he receives alerts from twitter (one of 330 followers) and then reads the detail on the website, as did 6000 or so others last year. Some also find information via facebook. I would however be grateful for more feedback on what works for you. What you would like to see on these sources, what suggestions you may have for doing it differently, and for persuading more to join up? Maybe a short topic at the members' meeting next Monday, February 3rd (see Diary Dates) where all of these matters will be open for discussion. We hope to see you there.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

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Founded 1992

Chairman: Mike Clarke

Member of: Hitchin Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Historic Towns Forum

Reflections on the Bancroft Recreation Ground enhancement

A 'Master Plan' for changing the Rec was produced by NHDC in 2012 and it was unclear how much of that could or would ever be open for discussion. The Council employed design consultants BDP, who after some hard work in a short time have produced "Initial Design Concepts". They assure us these can be changed after the Lottery bid, if a grant is forthcoming, from June onwards.

As we go to press NHDC Cabinet is due to consider that Lottery application and is likely to approve it, albeit with the knowledge that many aspects of the Initial Design Concepts are being questioned. We trust that the consultation that BDP are conducting will produce both support for the project in principle, but also some well reasoned suggestions which they will incorporate into the final design.

We were involved in setting up a meeting on January 13th at which BDP and a council officer listened to views and answered questions. Hitchin Forum has heard various views and this is a sample:

1. **Layout of the Rec** (and the heritage is clear, this was always a recreation ground with the Council's own covenant containing a title to this effect). BDP suggest opening up the view from the passing roads, but Nightingale Road is busy and noisy, so shielding the area from that is more desirable (tennis courts along the periphery of the park could be a screen or buffer to the space inside it).

2. The **river area** is to be opened up and enhanced. Good idea, but the river is small, the far bank is unsightly, and locating the play area next to it could be a hazard. The play area at Ransoms Rec was fenced again after local families (and councillors) protested that it was not safe.

3. **Provision for tennis** - BDP recommend reducing the number of tennis courts from 7 to 3, moving the tennis club to make way for the river enhancement and digging up the public courts. However, there has been no known survey of the current usage of the public courts. Casual observers from the Sainsbury offices and elsewhere say that they are well used. Many people report doing knock about on these courts with their children. The tennis club say that ideas of sharing their courts with casual players would be difficult due to high club usage. Some have said that any public courts on the park should have priority over a private club. Some say that a presence for the past 30 years makes the club's presence part of the heritage. There have been public courts for 84 years. BDP now say they will be exploring provision for tennis over the local area and NHDC is having a dialogue with the tennis club.

4. **Parking** - BDP recommend removing the bowls club parking in front of the pavilion as it is unsafe. But if the bowlers cannot park nearby visiting clubs will cancel fixtures and the club will die. The adjoining public car parks are often full, so spaces in those areas should be allocated for bowlers on match days.

5. A **Water feature** as part of a play area is recommended by BDP. Sounds good, especially for a sunny year such as 2013, but how often will it be so warm? Water features malfunction after a few years, perhaps more so in such a chalky area as this. Will the Council have a good maintenance budget to keep it running/flowing? Can we and do we want to duplicate Letchworth's Howard Gardens (which BDP say is already outdated)? The space here is smaller and shared with various other activities. A non-functioning water area may not become the attractive focus that illustrations can portray so easily.

6. **MUGA** (multi use games area) - BDP suggests an unfenced and virtually unmarked area near the river, suitable for younger children, but how safe would this be? If it were for older children/teenagers it would need a fence to protect passers-by and the loss of balls to the thrashing torrent of the Hiz.

7. **Enhance the bandstand** - this is supported, as is developing a program of activities around it. Linking this with events in Market Place, with a revived Rhythms of the World or other town happenings could improve its appeal.

8. **Extend and widen the use of the Pavilion** - there is only support for this idea, incorporating toilets (partly to avoid inappropriate use of the bushes), including a food kiosk, providing a meeting space for the

community groups that will not be suited to the town hall, and for children's activities and social groups for older people.

9. **Improving the play area** is high on everyone's agenda, and no alternatives have been suggested.

(Our thanks particularly to Hitchin Forum member **Vicky Wyer** for thoughts on this.)

Do look at the BDP website, do the survey, and email them <http://bancroftgardens.wordpress.com/>

Housing: a continuing public debate

Adrian Gurney, Chair of Hitchin Forum's Planning Group, reports on recent discussions in that group:

Since the end of 2013 there has been a great deal of discussion by the major political parties on how the shortage of housing and continued low building rates can be addressed. For one brief moment it looked as though all were agreed that garden cities were an important ingredient in meeting the need. Now there is some drawing back with the Prime Minister not wanting to come up with specifics, and the Leader of the Opposition asking the Lyons Commission to look at the right to grow of towns like Luton and Stevenage.

The Planning Group decided to have its own debate on the issues in January, and to suggest possible actions for Hitchin Forum in the current changing context.

The focus of our discussion was on the need for a major change in the way housing is delivered. The major housing developers have too great a dominance and tend to provide standardised housing which does not address opportunities for varied types of ownership or major reduction in energy costs; their land options surround towns and villages and lead to proposals that adversely impact on their character and setting.

The garden city or new settlement concept provides an opportunity to break this stranglehold by making it possible to identify land at lower values so that there can be improvements in provision of a range of housing and facilities, and a fresh start at provision of infrastructure, rather than overloading existing

facilities and swamping existing balanced settlements.

It was therefore agreed that we should suggest the following actions:

*We make a submission to the Lyons Commission making clear that there is a major difference between invoking a right to grow that would over-rule local democracy, and seeking co-operation between neighbouring authorities to explore the provision of a new settlement or garden city.

*We approach local societies in Hitchin, Letchworth and Baldock to present a case for working together to argue for the exploration of a new garden city on the main railway line north of Letchworth, and to do so prior to the publication of the Local Plan Draft Consultation.

* We contact those national societies and groups that are concerned with the quality of the local environment, such as CPRE and the Historic Towns Forum, in order to gain their support on the issues that are facing Hitchin and other towns in the South East of England.

The Planning Group's view is that such actions will place us in a stronger position when we have to consider the proposals put forward by NHDC in the Local Plan consultation that is likely to start in the next few months. The Group hopes to discuss these ideas further with Hitchin Forum Members at the next Members' Meeting on 3rd February.

Diary Dates

Monday, 3 February: **Hitchin Forum Members Meeting** - Discussion about the latest Hitchin issues.
Tuesday, 4 March: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm, **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Westmill Community Centre.

Updates

1. Luton Airport

As members will know, planning approval was granted by Luton Borough Council on 20th Dec 2013 by a hastily rescheduled Development Control Committee meeting attended by 6 councillors out of 11. One absentee was the representative for South Luton (the only Luton ward under the flight path) who was on pre-booked holiday leave.

Along with about 30 other objectors, I put Hitchin Forum's case that the proposal should be rejected (on the grounds of weak noise mitigation measures, lack of consideration of the effect on Hitchin's roads and failure to co-operate with NHDC as the neighbouring authority) to no avail. Eric Pickles will review the decision, although whether he has asked to do so, as the BBC claim, or whether this is because the LBC report on the application recommending approval already included this provision, is unclear. I am not optimistic that this will make much difference, given that the interim report of the Davies Commission simply assumes that Luton will reach capacity at 18m passengers per year with no comment on the current plans.

2. Hitchin Town Hall

Behind the shuttering, work is well underway, being carried out by a local - well, St. Albans! - contractor. Target completion date is June 2015. Hitchin Town Hall Ltd undertook a detailed survey before deciding on the brand (name and logo), consulting over 750 people. 45% were in favour of the name "Hitchin Town Hall" while 19% favoured "Hitchin Old Town Hall". 51% were in favour of the chosen logo, shortly to be revealed.

Next door, Nos. 14 and 15 have been purchased by HTH Ltd and are being demolished; the additional area will form part of the enlarged foyer and, on completion, will be handed over to

There are 2 crumbs of comfort. One is that the areas exposed to the highest levels of noise will be limited to those measured in 1999, not the larger areas predicted, as the airport wanted. This was a key demand of groups such as HALE and LADACAN. The other is that the Davies Commission rejected both of the suggested schemes which involved a 4-runway Luton – schemes so unrealistic that even the airport dissociated itself from them.

However, there are many causes of concern. Key commitments on night noise were omitted from the planning conditions, in spite of it being part of the much publicised 'new' noise mitigation measures published 'following consultation'. The annual 18m cap on passenger numbers applies only to scheduled flights. There is no commitment to mitigate the consequences of increased pressure on Hitchin's roads.

It is to be hoped that Eric Pickles will take some action about some of these issues – there is no shortage of those who will do their best to bring them to his attention.

Bill Sellicks

the Workman's Hall Trust (a charity whose trustees are council members responsible for the former "workman's hall").

HTH Ltd has assembled an impressive executive management team, all unpaid volunteers, who will, among other matters, be working on strategy and marketing issues. Any bright ideas, memories and pictures of the hall in its heyday will be welcome. HTH Ltd will shortly also launch a major fundraising campaign.

NHDC are in the process of applying for a lottery fund grant for fitting out the museum area.

John Keene

Fundraising – a note from our Treasurer

At the November 2013 AGM we discussed the issue of our funds and the increased level of campaigning activity with increased costs. Amongst other actions, we have registered with easyfundraising.org.uk. If you already use this service you'll know how to select the good cause you wish to support. Please also consider choosing Hitchin Forum!

If you are new to [easyfundraising](http://easyfundraising.org.uk), please click the link below or type it into your browser. For every purchase you make using easyfundraising.org.uk, you can choose Hitchin Forum and we will receive a cash donation. It is simple, costs you nothing and does not take any longer to shop on-line. Happy shopping!
www.easyfundraising.org.uk/how-it-works